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SUBJECT: Senegal: Opposition and civil society try to chart the
country's future

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On May 24, Senegalese opposition and civil society leaders concluded the Assises Nationales, a year-long national introspection to chart Senegal's future. This National Dialogue involved one hundred and seven organizations including thirty political parties. It was a successful exercise of participatory democracy aimed at diagnosing and developing a roadmap to strengthen Senegal's democracy and economy. The main result was the adoption of a National Charter for Democracy and Good Governance. The government boycotted the proceedings but President Abdoulaye Wade is aware of the force of this new movement and has called for a political dialogue to address the country's social and economic problems. End Summary.

Achievement of the Assises

¶2. (SBU) One of the leading figures of the directorate of the Assises noted that their biggest achievement was "to end Wade's hegemony in the minds of the Senegalese and defeat his party in the March 22 local elections." When the opposition boycotted the 2007 legislative elections, Senegal faced a political deadlock characterized by an absence of dialogue on core issues such as free and fair elections or good governance. However, the Senegalese refused to respond the opposition's call to take to the streets to pressure Wade. But they did respond favorably when asked to be involved in the staging of a national dialogue to adopt principles and define strategies for the future. Leaders of political parties, civil society, experts, and ordinary citizens met in local committees throughout the country to "define a vision and establish values and principles that will guide national reconstruction and the strengthening of the Republic." The three-hundred page report synthesized from these debates is a blueprint encompassing all sectors of society, from core civic values to political institutions and economic policies. Civil society leaders cooperated with the opposition who saw the benefit of allying with new figures to endorse alternative and fresh programs elaborated in a participatory process.

A Charter for Democracy

¶3. (SBU) The charter calls for pluralism as "the cement of national unity" envisioning a category of provisions that cannot be amended and a second category that can only be amended by referendum. This is clearly in response to President Wade's tendency to amend the Constitution to combat political enemies or tip the balance in his favor before elections. The Charter also calls for an end to "the trend to concentrate excessive powers in the hands of a President of the Republic." Breaking with a long tradition, the Charter states, "The President of the Republic, from now on, shall be liable to legal prosecution during his term in office for certain crimes." The most controversial element in the Charter is, however, the

prohibition for any first-degree family members (parent, child, or spouse) of a head of state to succeed him/her immediately after he/she leaves office. This is clearly meant to be a barb at Wade's plan to have his son succeed him. To redress the lack of judicial independence, the Charter calls for a stronger Constitutional Court that will include in its powers the adjudication of electoral issues. The head of this Court would also chair the High Council of the Judiciary currently presided over by the President and which manages the career of senior judges and prosecutors. This would deprive the Executive of the power to interfere in the Judiciary. For the lower courts, the Charter demands the creation of a Judge of Liberties who will protect those who are held in police custody prior to being charged. Currently there is almost no protection for suspects as they do not have immediate access to a lawyer and can conceivably be tortured by police officers seeking evidence by any means.

GOS remains hostile

14. (SBU) The government put a lot pressure on the organizers and almost succeeded in derailing the process. For example, General Mouhamadou Keita, a retired Chief of Staff of the Senegalese Armed Forces, after tremendous pressure from GOS, stopped performing his crucial role of managing the team in charge of centralizing and sifting the data collected for the report. The National Farmers' Association (CNCR) almost withdrew after the Minister of Agriculture threatened to end all support to their organization. Women's organizations such as COSEF (Council of Senegalese Women), AJA (Association of Female Lawyers), Reseau Siggil Jigeeen (Network for Women's promotion) did not take part because the ruling coalition threatened to punish those who participated.

A Powerful Leader

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15. (SBU) A major reason for the success of the Assises was due its chair, Amadou Makhtar Mbow, who headed UNESCO from 1974 to 1987. He managed to keep the momentum of the Assises and was able to counter pressures and threats from the GOS. One of the organizers told Embassy that Wade even had a plan to smear him by having the ruling party reveal that Mbow was not Senegalese but Moroccan and that his Senegalese father was not in fact his biological father. Wade apparently discussed this scheme with a local writer, Hamidou Dia, who warned him that this could lead to bloodshed and vengeance; the President quickly dropped the idea. Mbow enjoys deep support and in a meeting with Poloff he admitted that even though he was over 87 years old he had accepted this difficult task because, "what is happening in Senegal today is not what we fought independence for."

A transparent exercise

16. (SBU) When the Assises were launched in June 2008 the organizers said that they would need a budget of 103 million CFA to complete the work. In the end they managed to raise 109 million CFA. They underlined that all the money was donated by Senegalese, guaranteeing a certain level of independence and protection from potential accusations that foreign donors were behind the exercise. A detailed account of the spending was given to the large audience that attended the closing ceremony of the Assises. While civil society organizations and local political parties contributed 20% of the budget, by far the largest contributions came from businessmen and Senegalese living in the diaspora. The single biggest contribution was made by Moustapha Niasse, a former Prime Minister and leader of the opposition party AFP (Alliance of Forces of Progress) who donated 35 million CFA. The general public, through the purchase of coupons, contributed 5% of the budget.

Wade calls for dialogue

¶7. (SBU) On June 12, President Wade invited the opposition to have a political dialogue with his coalition. An influential Member of Parliament of Wade's party told Embassy that President Wade is disturbed by the results of the Assises especially the prohibition targeting his son which would deny the latter the possibility to run for office when he leaves. He noted that this prohibition "endangers the country's stability and requires a dialogue among political actors." In his view, Wade also needs to initiate this dialogue because he knows that he needs to enact difficult measures to face the current economic crisis. The opposition welcomed the offer but rejected conditionality about issues to be discussed, expressing a deep lack of trust in Wade who they believe is being insincere and Machiavellian in his calls for dialogue.

COMMENT

¶8. (SBU) The Assises Nationales are a turning point in Senegal's political history. It has boosted participatory democracy and given a chance to all segments of society to elaborate an appropriate vision for Senegal. Mbow noted that the conclusions reached are not for Wade to accept or refuse but that they are destined to benefit Senegalese citizens. The leadership of the Assises has indicated that, within a month, it will put together a follow-up committee that will serve as a watchdog to defend democratic institutions and liberties in Senegal.
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